A Salute to Topic Theory
The Edythe Baker Rollography 1919-1926

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Edythe Baker (1899-1971) made 72 piano rolls from 1919 to 1926, at the height of the player piano era. The majority of her rolls are blues-based word rolls, where the lyrics to the tune were printed on the right hand edge of the roll. As the roll is pumped and travels over the tracker bar, the printed lyrics are visible to the person foot-pumping and others gathered around the piano.

As a teenager, Baker worked in a Kansas City music store demonstrating and selling sheet music. Her playing caught the attention of local vaudeville presenters and she began employment as an entertainer. She toured regionally in the mid-west in her late teens, moving to New York City in 1919.

By the time Baker arrived in New York, the player piano and piano roll had achieved standardization and affordability. To create saleable popular piano roll arrangements, piano roll companies employed an army of roll editors and pianists such as Edythe Baker. These musicians developed arranging techniques for formatting popular tunes specifically for player piano performance.

Recognizing that the player piano could execute notes and complex note-timings in densities beyond human hand-playing, many popular piano rolls were fashioned to function as plausible substitutes for a dance band. Dancing and new types of dance music — culminating in the worldwide popularity of the foxtrot —was central to early 20th C. socialization. In a happy coincidence, the player piano's full sound that could also contain evanescent rhythmicized figures came to the market just as did the dance explosion and the syncopations of ragtime and the blues.

Roll editors found that a grab bag of common music genres and styles could be infused into piano roll arrangements of popular songs to good effect. These they reduced to their smallest recognizable fragments, slyly knitting them cheek by jowl into popular piano

roll arrangements. These musical topics ranged from dance rhythms such as the Charleston or tango, dance band and ragtime/stride-derived bass lines, snippets from Grieg and Dvorak, and virtuosic figuration lifted from Liszt Rhapsodies. Novelty piano techniques — exemplified in Zez Confrey's wildly popular "Kitten on the Keys" — were also drawn upon to add scintillatingly modernistic layers as well: more complex harmonies, whole tone scales and quartal constructions, chains of intricate high-speed rhythmic figures, and blue notes, slides and crushed tones — "smears" — that mimicked the microtonal vocal effects of the blues. This wide range of topics were inserted within and around the pop tune, particularly in the "breaks", where the tune rested at the end of phrases. In fact, Infusing topical styles into popular tunes had become ubiquitous in live piano performance by the 1910s. The result was an ongoing exchange: live performers influenced piano roll stylings, and in turn, performers such as Edythe Baker acquired a new type of virtuosity that mimicked the player piano's unique performance capacities.

By the time Baker arrived in NYC at age 20, she had incorporated mid-West ragtime and nascent mid-West blues stylings into her playing. The rising popularity of these genres and her marketable combination of skills propelled Baker to the upper echelon of the NYC entertainment industry, where she appeared as pianist, stage performer (singing and dancing), and in making piano roll recordings. Baker was signed by the behemoth player piano and piano roll manufacturer of the day, Aeolian, shortly after arriving in New York. The company initially promoted her as a ragtime and blues player, but she absorbed and developed additional styles in her evolving New York-based performance and roll career. Meanwhile, the preponderance of her rolls remained blues-oriented.

Baker's hand-playing could in fact have been captured in the roll recording process at Aeolian. At the same time, piano rolls were routinely heavily edited in the roll manufacturing process. This raises question that are a topic for another presentation, but, in any event, Baker's 1930s Decca 78 rpm phonograph recordings clearly verify her virtuosity and arranging prowess.

In order to capitalize on the huge sales of Bessie Smith's blues recordings, and given Baker's reputation as a blues- recording roll artist, Aeolian assigned Baker to make two foxtrot piano roll renditions of Bessie Smith's best-selling blues recordings.

I'll be comparing one of them, Bessie Smith's and composer Clarence Williams' 1923 Columbia phonograph recording of Jail House Blues to Baker's 1924 roll. Smith's accompanist was pianist Irving Johns. Lets start off by listening to the 1923 Bessie Smith recording:
Bessie Smith rendition of Jail House Blues
https://youtu.be/fX63IlaKpGc

Lord, this house is gonna get raided, yes sir!

Thirty days in jail, with my back turned to the wall, to the wall
Thirty days in jail, with my back turned to the wall
Look here, mister jail keeper, put another gal in my stall

I don't mind being in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long
I don't mind being in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long
Well, every friend I had is done shook hands and gone

You better stop your man from ticklin' me under my chin, under my chin
You better stop your man from ticklin' me under my chin
'Cause if he keeps on ticklin', I'm sure gonna take him on in

Good morning blues, blues how do you do, how do you do?
Good morning blues, blues how do you do?
Well, I just come here to have a few words with you

Over a typical 12-bar blues chord progression, Smith personalizes the tune's lyrics by manipulating rhythm and timing, bending pitches, and using microtonal slides. Meanwhile, Johns lays out the pulse mainly via a standard boom-chick bass which he varies as a walking bass, boogie bass or by using repeated mid-range chords and the like. Above the bass, Johns builds his own version of the blues choruss by drawing upon a toolbox of musical devices that had become standardized in blues piano performance by 1923. Johns' intensely syncopated right hand melody voiced mainly by chordally filled in octaves which he strategically varies by infusing pentatonic turning figures, grace notes and smeared slides — pianistic equivalents to microtonal vocal inflection — complement and underscore Smith's delivery. Between and within strains Johns also uses registeral shifts to enrich the musical tapestry.

Edythe Baker's rendition of Jail House (in the key of E-flat, as was Smith's) has six 12-bar choruses, as opposed to Smith's four. As indicated on the roll's leader, at roll speed 75 (7.5 feet per minute), the roll plays at a foxtrot uptempo pace:
Edythe Baker 1924 piano roll
https://youtu.be/Z1dSYdGKdmY

Baker incorporates many of the blues stylings heard in the Smith/Irving Johns performance. I therefore will be highlighting what she does that Johns does not.

To do so, I'll be using the same video performance you just heard of Baker's original 1924 Jailhouse Blues roll on my 1912 player piano. From it I've isolated 12-bar video clips for each of Baker's six blues choruses. Before each chorus I'll stop, make some observations and then you will hear and see it as the roll travels over the player piano's tracker bar.

Introduction
https://youtu.be/E1n4snMLiLY
Baker uses a distinctive voicing of an E-flat 2nd inversion chord with an added 6th in the break at measure 6. The chord, its inversion and tight spacing — preceded by a brief moment of treble figuration harmonized in 4ths — comes out of Novelty piano's then so fashionable tool box. Versions of this "modern" chord recurs throughout the choruses.

Variation 1
https://youtu.be/Zeoq6VjlYVE
Continues the texture of the Introduction, including use of the E-flat chord in measures 5 and 6, (this time with an added 7th). The chorus itself is set in a straightforward manner. What is introduced here is the addition of a string of long notes in the tenor. These were often added by roll arrangers to enhance linearity.

Variation 2
https://youtu.be/KAJ14_Cerog
In contrast to Variation 1, Variation 2 is set in in a low range and evokes cross-hand human performance. This effect, too was a favorite of roll arrangers, particularly at Aeolian. As a musical topic it reckons back to the immense popularity of Ethelbert Nevin's *Narcissus*. Note the distinctly Jelly Roll Morton-esque break that repeats three times. At the final cadence, Baker modulates to A-flat.

Variation 3
https://youtu.be/7PgGGyLtrvE
This variation and the next have no lyrics, presumably since Baker offers her own reinterpretation of the chorus. In the new key Baker recalls her introduction - the distinctive blocked left hand chords — here as an A-flat in 2nd inversion with an added 7th— and the turning pentatonic treble figures — and introduces a striding bass voiced in open 5ths. One can't help but wonder whether this and her treble shouting style here were

techniques learned from James P. Johnson's contemporaneous and influential QRS piano roll performances.

Variation 4
https://youtu.be/aLSVIc32Peo
Continues to feature the low bass notes in open 5ths, strong registeral contrasts and flicks of quartal Novelty. At the end, she abruptly modulates back to E-flat.

Variation 5
https://youtu.be/GoDu42Qqkm4
Printed lyrics return on the roll, but they are not those of the Smith version:

I am goin' up the country, Daddy, sorry I can't take you
I am goin' up the country, Daddy, sorry I can't take you
Ain't a thing up north that a monkey man can do.
Baker uses Confrey-esque quartal novelty figures in the treble above the blues-style boogie bass line.

Variation 6
https://youtu.be/gOwxWgBOKu4

The final variation returns to the humorous lyrics of Smith's third chorus. We hear a blues-inflected descant suggesting the word "tickling" of the lyrics. The Charleston dance rhythm finish off the chorus in chords that recall the E-flat +6 heard back in the introduction.

A series of descending parallel chords, a standard progression of Novelty Piano closes out the rendition.

Edythe Baker's Jailhouse Blues was formed by her performances as pianist, singer and dancer before mainstream, largely white audiences, and her roll work at Aeolian. It is a tight construction, unified by re-staged repetitions of aptly chosen topical fragments. But these fragments are not mere decorations or embellishments as so often is the case with pop piano roll arrangements. Rather, Baker expertly embeds an accretion of them within and around the choruses in order to facilitate a sense of forward momentum, the core ingredient of dance music.

Selected Bibliography

Among the many print sources consulted, several in four categories deserve special mention:

- **Topic Theory**

Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music : Expression, Form, and Style*. Schirmer Books ; London : Collier Macmillan, 1980.

This seminal book established the field of Topic Theory. Ratner summarized and catalogued the abundance of cross-references to everyday well-known styles and genres of the late 18th C. that were utilized in the compositions of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. Ratner's analysis of Viennese Classicism have startling points of correspondence to the rise of American popular dance, song, ragtime and the blues and the impact of these on popular piano performance and piano roll arranging.

Mirka, Danuta (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory.* New York; Oxford University Press, 2014.

Editor Danuta Mirka's Introduction (pages 1-57) provides an excellent summary of Ratner's work and the further investigations of Topic Theory covered in essays by other authors in the 2014 anthology.

- **Analysis**

Schuller, Gunther. *Early Jazz Its Roots and Musical Development.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Muir, Peter. *Long Lost Blues Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920*. Champaign, Illinois; University of Illinois Press, 2010.

An exemplary blending of social/cultural observations with musical analysis.

- **Economic and Cultural**

Tawa, Nicholas E. *Popular Song in the 20th Century : Styles and Singers and what They Said about America*. Lanham, MD; Scarecrow Press, 2005.

Despite Tawa's surprising omission of the player piano and popular piano roll idiom, the book provides an excellent overview of the social/cultural/economic factors that lead to the rise of American's unique popular music.

Londré, Felicia Hardison . *The Enchanted Years of The Stage Kansas City at The Crossroads of American Theater, 1870-1930*. Columbia, Missouri; University of Missouri Press, 2007.

The importance of Baker's early years in Kansas City to her musical development is described.

- **Method Books**

Shortly after musical or performance styles have been set, method books tend to appear for the purpose of educating the aspiring novice. Despite the time lag, period method books can provide a window into how styles and procedures were conceptualized and implemented. These three bear mentioning:

Axel Christensen. *Axel Christensen's Instruction Book For Jazz And Novelty Piano Playing*. Chicago; Axel W. Christensen,, 1927.

Confrey, Edward Elzear “Zez”. *Zez Confrey's Modern Course in Novelty Piano Playing*. New York: Jack Mills, 1923.

Glen R. Waterman. *Piano Jazz How To Play Any Popular Song Like A Player Piano Roll*. Los Angeles; Waterman Piano School 1927.

Edythe Baker Full Rollography

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/189lOk2aR2QBjxyM-2LEYnlE83uK2KrrSKLOsPb_imeY/edit#gid=0

YouTube Edythe Baker Playlist on roll and phonograph disc

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8-JSJNIy-tI0aljdxZIjaO9pqkzR6yIL